

Seven Poems by Parveen Shakir¹

Translated from the Urdu by
Alamgir Hashmi

Introduction:

Parveen Shakir (1952–1994), author of *Khushbū* (fragrance), *Ṣad-Barg* (Marigold), *Khud-Kalāmī* (musings), *Inkār* (refusal), *Kaf-e Āina* (mirror-dust), and *Māh-e-Tamām* (full-moon), is one of the most popular Urdu poets in the subcontinent. Along with other women poets of her generation, she was responsible for developing a new expression for women’s poetry in Pakistan. A teacher and a civil servant in her country, she also spent some time in the United States, as a Fulbright Scholar. All Shakir’s poems included here are translated from her collection, *Inkār* (Islamabad, 1990).

A Message²

It’s the same weather.
The rain’s laughter
rings in the trees, echoes.
Their green branches

¹ These poetry translations were previously published in the now defunct *The Arabesques Review* (Algeria), *CipherJournal* (USA), *Wilderness House Literary Review* (USA), and *Literatur- und Kunstseiten von Johannes Beilharz* (*Literature and Art Pages of Johannes Beilharz*; Germany). These are reprinted in *Urdu Studies* with the translator’s permission.

² “Ek Paighām”

wear golden flowers
and smile thinking of someone.
The breeze is a scarf, again the light-pink.
The path to the garden that knows us
is looking for us.
The moment of moon-rise
is waiting for us.

Pink Flowers³

Pink flowers blossomed
in the season I met you.

With your attentions they are opening again,
though these wounds had healed already.

How long could the columns support
these houses shaken to their foundations?

That old strangeness came back,
as if our meetings had been done.

The body was still hotfoot with its infatuations,
the feet bruised on the way.

Hot Line⁴

How he used to complain to me!
So many people
come between us
we cannot talk.
In the season's first rain,
first snow,
full-moon nights,
evening's mild fragrance,
morning's blue cool,

³ "Gulābī Phūl Dil Meñ Khil Chuke The"

⁴ "Hot Line"

how helpless!
How the heart aches!

Today between him and me
there is no third.
There can be contact
with a slight movement of the hand.
But how many seasons have passed
since hearing that voice.
It is not hard for me to call upon him,
but the truth is
the voices and the accents
do not have the same tones.
The tune is the same but the hearts
are not close enough.

WHERE AM I?⁵

Where am I
in your life?

In the morning breeze
or the evening star,
hesitant drizzle
or sharp rain,
silver moonlight
or hot noon,
deep thoughts
or casual tunes?

Where am I
in your life?

Down from work,
a weekend's interval
on a beach,
or an unintended
silken release between your fingers

⁵ “Tumhārī Zindagī Meñ”

from serial smoke?
Or a readily replenished,
freshened moment without wine,
or a moment's leave, anonymous,
between the breaking of one dream
of love and another's beginning?

Where am I
in your life?

Vanity⁶

He is so simple.
His world is so different from mine.
So separate are his dreams
and his preferences.
He says very little.
He writes
this morning I saw
some lovely flowers in the lawn
and thought of you.

I know
I am at that dishevelled stage of life
when my face
is not much like any flower.
But I wish—whatever he says—
I could believe it a while.

Steel Mills Worker⁷

Black ghost
born of sperm of coal
at hellish temperatures.
His work now to keep shovelling
coal into the burning furnace.

⁶ “Inkār”

⁷ “Steel Mills kā ek K̄huṣūṣī Mazdūr”

For this
he gets extra wages and special diet,
and no work beyond the four hours
at a time. Perhaps he
does not know that he has signed
a suicide pact in full knowledge.
He is the fuel for this furnace.

We Are All Dr Faustus⁸

In a way we are all
Dr Faustus.
One from his craze
and another helpless from blackmail
barters away his soul.
One mortgages his eyes
to trade in dreams
and another offers
his mind as collateral.
All that one may need sense
is the currency of the day.
So a survey of life's Wall Street says
that among those with the buying power these days
self-respect is very popular.

⁸ “Ham Sab ek Tarah se Doctor Faustus Haiñ”